

Ex-General Hints at Big Role As U.S. Champion of Contras

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HOUSTON, Oct. 13 — Over the last couple of years, an organization operating out of a cramped three-room suite in Phoenix with only three regular employees says it has supplied 8,000 "freedom fighter kits" to the contra rebels in Nicaragua. The camouflage-covered kits contain such items as shaving cream, non-melting candy and Spanish-language Bibles.

"The Bibles have been a major hit," Joyce Downey, the executive director, said in an interview in the group's office there last week. The organization, the United States Council for World Freedom, also supplied a refurbished Vietnam-era UH-1B helicopter to rebels fighting the Sandinista Government, for what the group said was unarmed evacuation of the wounded.

But the name of the council's chairman, John K. Singlaub, has frequently cropped up as a possible conduit for covert American aid to anti-Communist forces in Central America that is more deadly than candy and Bibles.

Last week, at least one unnamed Administration source said groups controlled by General Singlaub, a retired Army officer who was once an operative of the Central Intelligence Agency, were behind the weapon-laden American cargo plane that was shot down over Nicaragua.

Close Ties to Administration

But some associates of the 65-year-old general suggest that the Administration was using General Singlaub, who does indeed maintain close ties with both the Reagan Administration and with the Nicaragua rebels, to divert the glare of publicity from the C.I.A. and other clandestine operations with more resources than the general's tiny council. Others have suggested that he willingly played a decoy role.

The general was not in Phoenix last week, but in a telephone interview from Washington today, he vigorously denied he was involved with the plane and said it was "just outrageous" that an Administration official had insisted he was linked to it even after his denials.

"I wish I had been in charge," he said. "I could have done a better job. I certainly would not have flown the C-123 in such an amateurish way."

But regardless of any connection to that plane, the nature and extent of General Singlaub's role in Central America is unclear.

He said that the Council for World Freedom, which has been designated by the Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt educational organization and raises funds from private sources, provides only "humanitarian" assistance to "Democratic resistance" in several countries.

But he hinted broadly that he plays a somewhat larger role in Nicaragua through his anti-Communist activities abroad, where he is not subject to American laws.

Keeps U.S. Officials Informed

"I have knowledge of where people can go to get what they want in terms of weapons," he said of his aid to the contras. "I have given military advice and provided them with information about how to go about contacting the international arms markets." He said he did this entirely outside of the United States and without American money or Government instructions, although he added that he kept high Administration officials informed of his activities "so they are not surprised."

General Singlaub had been in the Far East for five weeks before returning to Washington last week. Until recently, he was chairman of the World Anti-Communist League, an international body with roots in Taiwan and South Korea that has about 90 member groups worldwide. He has gained a measure of praise from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith for purging the Anti-Communist League of racists, anti-Semites and other right-wing extremists.

The Phoenix-based freedom council is the league's American affiliate. According to Ms. Downey it has raised about \$500,000 so far this year, mostly in small contributions. Over the last two years, she said, the council has provided \$10 million to \$25 million in cash and "in-kind" aid: four to eight small aircraft ("non gun-mounted") to the contras, boots to rebels fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan, \$20,000 in medicines to Cambodian resistance forces, and help for groups in Mozambique, Ethiopia and other countries.

Meanwhile the council's chairman has emerged as a mysterious and controversial figure of the American right. A Congressional aide said that General Singlaub, along with a retired Air Force officer, Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, and a former Republican Congressional aide, Robert W. Owen, are the chief links between the Administration and the contras.

'Guy You Want on Your Side'

A 5-foot, 7-inch bulldog of a man with a military brush haircut and a combative spirit, General Singlaub is "the kind of guy you'd like to have by your side in a barroom brawl," said one Phoenix acquaintance, Pat Murphy, the publisher of The Arizona Republic.

General Singlaub was a C.I.A. officer in China after World War II, then deputy chief of the C.I.A. mission in Korea in 1951. Later he became a counter-insurgency officer during the Vietnam War. But his military career came to an abrupt end in 1979 after he publicly criticized President Carter's plans to cut troops in Korea.

He retired to his home in Tabernash, Colo., from which he began to overhaul the Anti-Communist League and the freedom council. Both stridently anti-Communist groups had fallen into disrepute and lost members because they had become havens for violent extremists and ex-Nazis.

According to a 1981 report by the Anti-Defamation League, the World Anti-Communist League, originally formed in 1966, had "increasingly become a gathering place, a forum, a point of contact, for extremists, racists and anti-Semites." There were reports its affiliates were involved in death squads and torture. The American af-

filiate, formed in 1970 as the American Council for World Freedom, also came under racist control.

But things began to change when General Singlaub took over in 1981. He expelled the virulently anti-Semitic Mexican affiliate, Tecos, and the South American affiliate, the Latin American Anti-Communist League.

Checked Applicants With ADL

According to Irwin Suall, the fact-finding director for the Anti-Defamation League, General Singlaub approached his group with a list of applicants to the anti-communist league and asked for guidance. He was told many were European neo-Nazi groups, and they were refused admission.

Last year, General Singlaub asked the B'nai Brith group for a letter on its findings. The letter said that since he had taken over the league, the general had "brought about a considerable cleansing of the composition of the organization." It went on: "We are satisfied at the very least that substantial progress has been made since 1981 in ridding the organization of the racists and anti-Semites whose presence previously led us to publicly express our concern."

While Mr. Suall said the ADL did not have enough information to give a "totally clean bill of health," he said it was "perfectly evident" that the general was, if a bit of a "cowboy," not an anti-Semite.

Others remain dubious. In a recent book, "Inside the League," Scott Anderson and John Lee Anderson, two journalists, contend that the Anti-Communist League continues to harbor fascists under a new patina of respectability. But the general calls the book "absolute nonsense."

General Singlaub is also one of 30 defendants in a Federal civil suit brought by two journalists injured in the bombing of a 1984 press conference in Costa Rica held by Eden Pastora, the former contra leader. The suit, brought under racketeering legislation, charges that General Singlaub was involved in drugs and arms smuggling and conspired to assassinate Mr. Pastora. The general has called the charges "fabrications" of the radical left.

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A 'Nightmare Organizationally'

His tenure at the council in Phoenix has been marked by some turmoil. Larry H. Tifverberg, a retired Army foreign affairs officer with wide experience in Southeast Asia, resigned as executive director earlier this year after less than a year on the job. In an interview, Mr. Tifverberg said that while he admired the general as a "patriot," he was a "nightmare organizationally."

Mr. Tifverberg said he was unable to run the group effectively because when he said no, people would "go around" him directly to the general.

He said the council was often approached by people who had more than just "humanitarian" activities in mind. "I had people calling every day asking for guns, ammunition, everything," he said. "It was very clear our charter was for humanitarian aid. In fact, Singlaub is involved with other activities. People thought if they called the council, they would be involved in other activities."

Was the council linked to the plane that was shot down? "Categorically, the council was not involved — I don't think the general is mixed up with our friends in the company," Mr. Tifverberg said, using intelligence argot for the C.I.A. "But I'm not going to say it was not a company operation."

I.R.S. Studying Group

Meanwhile, the Internal Revenue Service has been scrutinizing the council. In recent months, according to council officials, the I.R.S. has conducted a detailed audit of the council's books amid suggestions that its funds have been used for purposes forbidden charitable organizations. The council says it has been given a clean bill of health, although the agency has not concluded the investigation.

Aid from the council to the Nicaraguan rebels (the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, or F.D.N.) is channelled through New Orleans, where Mario Calero, brother of the contra leader Adolfo Calero, operates a warehouse.

"We deal directly with the F.D.N. people in the United States," said Ms. Downey. "They know the safe routes. General Singlaub has been down there a number of times. We are assured everything we have designated is getting to them. He's got many accolades from the soldiers."

Back in Phoenix, according to Ms. Downey, the council, for all its rich conservative friends, is an impecunious operation in "a never-ending search for money." It has considered various business ventures, such as opening an automobile dealership, to raise money. The work goes on in the office on East Camelback Road, amid all the signs of Phoenix's wealth. The offices are adorned with, among other things, portraits of General Singlaub, dripping with medals, and Nancy Reagan, as well as an invitation to President Reagan's inauguration.